

Cloud banks have disappeared to the east of the Shortgrass country. Rainfall reports have been limited to vague news releases. Third or fourth-hand information is the best source available.

The silence is unusual. Shortgrassers generally blab about their rainfall to an extent that'd make a peafowl think he'd lost his preening powers. Lots of old pickups would still be running today if their owners hadn't stripped the transmissions while spreading weather news.

I think the weather blackout is due to the large numbers of ranchers who haven't had had enough rain. Hombres blessed by the moisture have decided that they didn't want everyone from their wife's double cousins to their associate lodge brothers moving in or them.

Short-lived boomlets have taught the citizens to be wary of a sudden flush of popularity. When the grass is green and prices good, folks can get might friendly.

I know back in the early 50s, my wife's relatives caused us to wear out a brand new popcorn popper spending the weekends at the ranch. They must have eaten a 40 pound sack of corn before the big drouth wrecked the country. No telling how much cane molasses was used to fill them up on pulling taffy, and I wouldn't venture to guess how many peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that clan put away that year.

It was so bad that had the plush times lasted we'd have had to put banquet cards on the tables to seat the guests. Old King Solomon himself couldn't have stood having so many in-laws underfoot. I'd have moved down to the barn to live, but there were so many nephews, and nieces jumping off the roofs and playing on the saddles that I couldn't have slept under heavy medication.

After the gigantic dry spell hit, however, the traffic thinned down. As both the weather and the market failed, an orphan wouldn't have made a better wife as far as her relatives were concerned. For six or seven years, the only strays we fed were an occasional unpapered alien drifting northward. Then, by the time the drouth ended, we had so many kids that no one came by except the census takers and curious sightseers. (We had five of our eight kids during the opening and closing of that drouth. Be sure and check with me if anyone ever tells you that drouths will slow down a human population explosion.)

Oldtimers claim they long for the days when overnight visiting was a custom. The greybeards can paint some gay scenes of the neighbors throwing the kids on quilts and spending two or three days at one outfit. Probably what they long for in reality are the days when everybody packed up their buggies and went home.

To my knowledge, legislation hasn't been passed forbidding the viejos from throwing month-long parties of undetermined size. Most of them I know are too busy catching jets to Hawaii or Vegas to throw a 15-minute tea party. Their customs as a general rule are about as old-fashioned as those of a high school cheer leader. An artist that wanted to do a Whistler's Mother type thing in this age would have to know how to put up his easel in the aisles of a Boeing 707.

Some day I'm going to ask my wife what happened to her family. Every once in awhile I get to wondering if they'd still go into sobering fits at the mention of my name or the word "ranching." They haven't been by for popcorn balls or taffy in a long time. They might have moved out of state; I don't recall her mentioning them too much in the last few years.

The smart alecs who are trying to hide how much rain they are getting won't get by with it. Word will spread around. Green grass can't be hidden by a woven wire fence. Unfortunately, the absence of grass can't be hidden, either.